

August 27, 2009

Secretary Arne Duncan
United States Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Secretary Duncan:

We applaud your leadership in putting real school reform at the top of the national agenda. The fact that President Obama has made education a top priority is all the more impressive given the other domestic issues at play in Washington and across the country. But making education a priority is not only important; it also an economic imperative.

Education is a key part of moving the country out of the recession, and regaining the U.S.'s economic competitiveness in the international marketplace. Race to the Top is an unprecedented opportunity to pursue exactly the things that will get us there, and on which the vast majority of educators, administrators, and policy experts have reached consensus over the last several years to ensure every child has a world-class education.

Under ARRA, President Obama and Congress asked that states commit to education reform in four broad areas:

- To adopt high academic standards and state-of-the art 21st Century assessments;
- To implement data systems to track student progress, drive better instruction and, inform school-based interventions;
- To improve teacher effectiveness and to equalize the quality of instruction between high- and low-income, and between high- and low-minority schools; and,
- To turn around low-performing districts and schools.

We wholeheartedly endorse your decision to make comprehensive and systemic reform across each of the four above areas the top determinative factor in awarding state Race to the Top grants, and in being selective in choosing only a select group of states that want to pursue model reforms.

Race to the Top is a competitive grant program that comes on the heels of \$95 billion in general aid to education provided under ARRA, and tens of billions more that will be appropriated by the federal government for education this fall. In accepting the monies in ARRA outside the \$4.35 billion Race to the Top, states have made assurances that they will pursue reforms, broadly defined, in each of the four above areas.

Some are arguing that the current economy makes education reform impossible and that Race to the Top should be put off until our economic situation turns around. But a report

issued in April by McKinsey & Company shows that *not* pursuing education reform is the most costly decision of all, for our society and for U.S. workers. The report found that:

“Existing [achievement] gaps impose the economic equivalent of a permanent national recession—one substantially larger than the deep recession the country is currently experiencing. For individuals, avoidable shortfalls in academic achievement impose heavy and often tragic consequences via lower earnings, poor health, and higher rates of incarceration.

“If the gap between black and Latino student performance and white student performance had been narrowed [in recent years], GDP in 2008 would have been between \$310 billion and \$525 billion higher, or 2 to 4 percent of GDP. If the gap between low-income students and the rest had been similarly narrowed, GDP in 2008 would have been \$400 billion to \$670 billion higher, or 3 to 5 percent of GDP.”

As such, the timing of bold and ambitious education reform could not be better.

It is therefore of utmost importance that the Secretary provide firm leadership to states and school districts who want to take their efforts - to narrow achievement gaps and build an education infrastructure that enables students and the nation to meet the demands of a 21st century global economy- to the highest possible level.

Toward that end, the “Race to the Top” fund should be reserved for providing venture capital only to those states that have shown the willingness to meet their obligations under ARRA and go above and beyond them to serve as models of transformative education reform for the rest of the nation.

Not every state need take such ambitious efforts and decide to apply for Phase 1 Race to the Top funding, nor do we expect them to.

Rather, we hope that those states that are ready and able to make such applications, and whose applications are deemed as exemplary and ultimately are approved by peer reviewers for Phase 1, will serve as models for states that seek Phase 2 funding. Further, we expect that feedback from the pool of states that ultimately receive Race to the Top funding in Phase 1 or Phase 2 will serve as models for the remaining states next year, and that their successes or shortcomings will inform the upcoming ESEA reauthorization process and other subsequent education initiatives.

We do not see Race to the Top as a “one size fits all process.”

For example:

- There are a number of assessment and data systems that may be deemed “world class” as long as they follow some basic and common sense parameters, such as replacing the

“fill-in-the-bubble” assessments that we all know are grossly inadequate; developing and implementing online assessment systems; linking teacher and student data for the purpose of evaluating teachers and principals; and, allowing the examination of data in “real time” so that adjustments can be made in school improvement efforts.

- There are a number of ways that states could decide to turnaround low-performing schools, as long as such efforts address basic issues such as the adequacy of curriculum, the existence of intensive student supports in and outside of the regular school day, and an honest assessment and a fundamental restructuring of the human capital resources that are brought to bear on behalf of students and their families.

Both President Obama and Secretary Duncan recognize the valuable role high quality public charter schools can play in turnaround efforts, in implementing new and innovative educational approaches, or as entities that can quickly start new high quality schools to replace those that simply aren’t working.

Although not a panacea or a silver bullet, high-quality charter schools are and should remain a core part of this administration’s Race to the Top strategy. Charters are one of *several* possible interventions under Race to the Top, but they are the *only* option that state laws effectively *exclude*. Right now, 365,000 students are on charter school waiting lists. Raising charter caps and funding them equitably will expand, rather than narrow, the range of potential options not only for school administrators and educators, but also for parents.

- There are a number of ways that states and districts could address teacher quality and equity, such as

- expanding proven, alternative routes to teaching - through programs like Teach for America, the New Teacher Project, and ABCTE - that set higher entrance criteria for novice teachers, and provide incentives for such teachers to stay in the profession longer and commit to remain as teachers in the schools in which they started beyond their fellowship periods;

- instituting differential compensation systems for teachers based on factors other than seniority, such as skills in shortage areas like math and science, special education, or working with non-English speakers;

- instituting differential compensation systems for teachers based on factors other than seniority, designed to attract strong teachers to work and stay in high-poverty and high-minority schools;

- requiring that all first and second year teachers be given a lighter teaching load so that they have time for mentoring, lesson planning and interaction with colleagues, and professional development.

The history of school reform efforts is littered with stories where high-level rhetoric

about ambitious goals is followed by hyperbolic public debate and distortion and, ultimately, results in capitulation by government officials who succumb to political pressure to reward states that have proven to be unable or unwilling to advance credible and ambitious reforms.

We know there will be uncomfortable and highly charged discussion, in public and in private, over the coming months. This is always the case when people who have been doing things one way over a long period of time are asked to do things differently based on the common good rather than on a more narrow set of interests.

Only if we stand firm and invest initially in only those states and districts that have shown the willingness to break out of the old way of doing things, and advance game-changing models that best serve our children will things, this time, be different. The higher we set the bar on the Race to the Top, the more likely we are to enable those with proven approaches to expand their efforts, and in turn set the right example to which we expect other states to strive.

We stand behind you in this effort and look forward to working with you to ensure that you are successful and, more important, that after decades of rhetoric and inertia, we finally succeed in offering every child in the U.S., - black, brown, or white, rich or poor, native or foreign born - the opportunities to which we all agree are their individual rights and societal necessities.

Sincerely,

Democrats for Education Reform

Education Equality Project

National Alliance of Public Charter Schools

The New Teacher Project

Policy Innovation in Education Network

ConnCan

DC School Reform Now

Advance Illinois

Advance Innovative Education, Louisiana

Tennessee SCORE

Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education

The American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence